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ABSTRACT

A study of why adult literacy students stopped attending beginning reading tutorial programs was conducted at nine sites that were part of the Pittsburgh Literacy Initiative. A total of 192 adults were identified as having discontinued their reading programs, all of which were one-on-one tutorial programs. The reading level of these dropouts had been tested at the 0- to 4th-grade level. Sixty of those dropouts participated in the study. Data were collected through interviews with persons responsible for working with students and through telephone or face-to-face interviews with dropouts. Forty-seven percent of dropouts cited personal factors, 40 percent cited program factors, and 13 percent cited other factors as the reasons they dropped out. Personal factors cited were work schedules (23 percent), personal or family health reasons (17 percent), and family crises (7 percent). Within the program factors category, the reason cited most often was a tutor factor, such as incompatibility (18 percent). Other program factors included the dropouts' dissatisfaction with or embarrassment about their lack of learning (18 percent) and the place or time for tutoring (3 percent). Asked how to reduce the attrition rate, 77 percent of respondents suggested such things as increasing tutor and student support, evaluating the tutor-student match, recognizing achievement, or changing the time and/or place of tutoring. When participants were asked to identify what they hoped to be able to read, most said books, newspapers, magazines, mail, or the Bible. Only 10 of the 60 indicated that they wanted to improve their competency in dealing with work-related reading material. (The document contains seven references and two tables.) (CML)

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ATTRITION IN URBAN BASIC LITERACY PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES TO INCREASE RETENTION

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ATTRITION IN URBAN BASIC LITERACY PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES TO INCREASE RETENTION

ABSTRACT

This study presents the findings of a survey of adult literacy students who had stopped attending beginning reading tutorial programs. Factors which were directly attributable to the programs (including tutor factors and dissatisfaction about a lack of learning) were consistently identified. Various program strategies are indicated to reduce the attrition rate. These include increased tutor and student support, the evaluation of the student/tutor match, recognition of achievement, assistance with goal identification and the construction of drop-out prediction models. More flexible scheduling is also indicated, as is better record-keeping and the development of common definitions.

ATTRITION IN URBAN BASIC LITERACY PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES TO INCREASE RETENTION

Although increasing numbers of adults across the country are taking advantage of the basic literacy opportunities available to them, too many are not completing their programs; instead they become part of the group labeled "drop-outs", individuals who fail to complete a literacy program without significantly improving their literacy skills or reaching their literacy goals. Such attrition is increasingly becoming a matter of concern and discussion. In fact, according to Cain and Whalen (1977), there is an attrition rate of between 40% - 60% for adult literacy programs. In one study conducted in a large city, Farra (1988) reports that of those who were referred to a literacy program, 15% failed to make contact and a further 5%, having contacted the program, failed to enroll. Follow-up data from a local literacy referral agency (Pittsburgh Literacy Initiative, 1988), indicate that after a six month period, of 69 adults who made contact with the referral agency, 20% never contacted a program and 26% exited the program they contacted before completion.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an investigation of those individuals who had dropped out of literacy programs and to analyze the data relative to their reasons for dropping out, with the expectation that the findings would have implications for both program improvement and student retention strategies.

Although it is difficult to conduct research with this adult population, given the frequent lack of geographical stability,

the wide variety of educational settings (often with inadequate records), and the consequent cross-sectional research which may lead to erroneous comparisons across dissimilar adults (Karnes et al, 1980), there have been several studies conducted regarding reasons for dropping out. Cramer (1982), reporting on those attending an adult basic education program, found that those who dropped out felt discouraged by their lack of progress or experienced more conflicts between work and class schedules than those who remained in service. Leonard, Rachal and Jackson (1986) found situational reasons for dropping out were given more frequently than instructional or dispositional ones. Smith-Burke (1987) identified four key factors which served as retention motivators for adult literacy students--family support, perceived progress in developing literacy skills, heightened self-esteem, and the provision of a good teacher. Smith-Burke concluded that both program and personal factors interrelate to impact a student's motivation to continue in a literacy program.

METHODS

Sample

The Pittsburgh Literacy Initiative (PLI), a regional coordinating agency that directs individuals in need of upgrading their reading skills to an appropriate community literacy program, initiated this study because of its interest in the number of drop-outs and their reasons for leaving literacy programs.

Nine literacy sites, referral agencies for PLI located throughout Allegheny County, were included in the project. All of these sites already had a PLI supervised VISTA Volunteer assigned to them. Six of the sites were community-based organizations, multi-service neighborhood facilities in which a range of support services are located. Three of the sites were literacy council sites, non-profit independent agencies affiliated with national literacy programs, where trained volunteers work with adults with reading difficulties. Because of the incomplete records at various sites, it was not possible to calculate the percent of drop-outs. However, the specific numbers of drop-outs over a two year period ranged from a minimum of seven in one small program to a maximum of 53 in another.

A total of 192 individuals were identified as having discontinued their reading program in the nine sites: 118 at the six community-based sites and 74 at the three literacy council sites. All of these 192 adults had been enrolled in a one-on-one volunteer tutorial program and all had been tested as reading between the 0-4 grade level. Of the 192, 69 were reached and 60 (31% of the total identified) volunteered to participate in this survey. Of the remaining 123, the callers were unable to reach 33 (17%) of the individuals after four attempts; 54 (28%) had no telephone or a disconnected or unlisted telephone; 11 (6%) had reentered a literacy program; 9 (5%) had moved out of the district; 10 (5%) were in some type of drug treatment program or were incarcerated; and 5 (3%) were on temporary leave from the

literacy program or indicated that they had reached their reading goal; 1 was deceased.

Table 1 describes those who were contacted and elected to

Insert Table 1 about here

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participate in the study (n = 60) and those who were contacted but chose not to participate (n = 9). The mean age of the participants (those who were reached and responded) was 38.8 years; there were 32 males (53%) and 28 females (47%); 35 (58%) were minority, and 25 (42%) were white. As a group, the participants were younger than the non-participants; there were proportionately more males and more minority clients. More than one third (n = 22) of the participants had completed grade 12. Ten of those who graduated had been in special education for part of their schooling. Seventeen (28%) of the participants had left school after grade 8 or grade 9; 6 (10%) had minimal or no schooling (0 to grade 3).

Eighteen (42%) of the participants were currently employed either full-time or part-time. Of those employed, about two thirds had to read some job-related material. Of the 58% who were currently unemployed, approximately two-thirds (n = 22) had not held a job during the past year; the others had held from one to five jobs.

Procedures

Stage 1. The first stage of the study was designed to obtain the perceptions of the literacy providers regarding possible reasons for attrition. At each of the literacy sites the assigned PLI VISTA Volunteer interviewed at least one person responsible for working with clients. These individuals were asked for opinions and observations as to why adult clients did not complete the literacy program. Nine possible reasons were identified: incompatibility with tutor, transportation, child care, lack of student interest, health problems, scheduling, job conflict, lack of work discipline, and lack of support from family and friends.

Stage 2. A telephone questionnaire based upon the input from the nine sites (Stage 1) as well as from information in the current literature (Leonard et al, 1986; Farra, 1988; Smith-Burke, 1987; Cramer, 1982; and Weisel, White & Travis, 1980) was designed to obtain specific information concerning reasons for attrition. Since several individuals would be responsible for making the telephone calls, a highly structured interview was used. The question format was planned to achieve a balance between questions requiring a prompted choice and those allowing an open-ended response. The telephone interview was designed to take less than 10 minutes, if the responder did not elaborate in answering. Questions were intended to be as unobtrusive as possible while at the same time eliciting information about the reasons clients left the programs.

Stage 3. Training was given to all interviewers in the administration of the questionnaire. Demographic information for each client was compiled from the student files at each site. During the three weeks following the training, each interviewer was to make at least three attempts to reach the clients designated as drop-outs. Calls were to be made at different times of the day and on different days. Several weeks later, a final telephone call was made to those clients who had not been reached during earlier attempts.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Three questions on the questionnaire were essential in analyzing data regarding attrition. Participants were asked to identify (from a prepared list) the factors that may have affected their attendance. They were then asked to indicate which reason was the most important one for leaving the program. Thirdly, they were asked to identify three factors that might have convinced them to stay in the literacy program.

Data in response to the three questions were categorized into three broad groups: factors that were directly attributable to the program or providers (program); factors generated by the individual's situation (personal) and factors that required the assistance of other social service agencies (See Table 2).

The major reason for dropping out cited by the 60 participants fell within the personal category (47%). Program factors accounted for 40% of the reasons, and factors requiring the assistance of other agencies accounted for 13% of the

reasons. The personal factor mentioned most frequently as a the major concern was the work schedule of the participant, (23%).

Insert Table 2 about here

Personal or family health reasons accounted for 17% of the responses.

Within the program category, tutor factors (incom atibility with the tutor or resignation of tutor, 18%) and students' dissatisfaction or embarrassment about their lack of learning, (18%) were the most common. The most frequently mentioned reason that required the assistance of other agencies was difficulty with transportation, (7%).

When the participants were asked to identify all the factors that affected their attendance, 99 were generated. (See Table 2, Column 2). Program factors accounted for 44% of the reasons; personal reasons for 40% and factors requiring the assistance of other agencies, 15%. Again, the personal factor mentioned most frequently was work schedule. Nearly a quarter of the responses identified the lack of a feeling of success as a factor in dropping out while problems with tutors comprised a further 16% of the factors mentioned.

When participants were asked to make suggestions regarding factors that would have kept them in the program (See Table 2,

Column 3), 77% of the responses related to factors that service providers could impact. Sixteen percent were personal factors and 7% were factors that other agencies could impact.

To better understand the reasons for attrition, participants were asked two related questions concerning their reasons or goals for entering the program, and the tutor who had been assigned to them. When participants were asked to identify what they hoped to be able to read, most individuals indicated that they wanted to be able to read books, newspapers or magazines, their mail or the Bible. These personal goals far out-weighed interest in workplace literacy: only ten indicated that they wanted to improve their competency in dealing with work-related reading material.

When participants were asked to describe their tutor, of 326 ratings given to the question, "Describe your tutor", 94% were positive. Only two clients rated the tutor unsatisfactory on all rating points. More typical of the respondents was a qualifier such as: "She was a very nice lady but just couldn't answer my questions very well. She wasn't a good match for me." Several participants identified the loss of a tutor as a contributory factor in their decision to leave a program.

DISCUSSION

In summary, the findings of this study are consistent with those of other studies that have been conducted which indicate that both program and personal factors affect an individual's decision regarding continuation in a literacy program. These are

factors which literacy providers need to address if they are to improve their retention rates by meeting the needs of their client population more effectively.

The major specific factors contributing to attrition that providers could impact identified in this study related (1) to the effectiveness of the tutor and tutor attrition and (2) to self-image and feelings of success and achievement.

When participants were asked to make suggestions as to what would have kept them in the program (See Table 2, Column 3) 15% of the responses related to the need to be working on a self-designed goal or material. This need to define or select one's own goals is consistent with current information on how adults learn.

There was a marked decrease in the identification of personal factors as suggestions for retention. This focus on program factors may again relate to the fact that as adults, the participants were aware that personal or work problems were unlikely to be impacted by the literacy program. However, the limited identification of changes in a student's work schedule as a possible method to increase retention (10% of responses) was matched by an increase in dissatisfaction with the time and location of the tutorial (17% of responses). Aware that their work schedule was unlikely to change, participants were looking for greater flexibility on the part of the program.

The term "drop-out" really overstates the status of the adult clients studied. Of those reached, 40% indicated that they

would re-enter a literacy program when life circumstances allowed. The availability of literacy tutoring - the opportunity to read or read better - often cannot compete when set against the need to earn a living, care for a sick relative or deal with an individual's own health problems. The long term goal of reading improvement and its possible contribution to economic self-sufficiency may have to be set aside when it conflicts with the short term and more urgent need for survival.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest a need for literacy programs to provide training for their tutors to help them develop appropriate strategies to address the special educational, social and emotional needs of adults who have not been successful in school. Tutors may also need additional support and training to enable them to cope with what can be an emotionally draining experience. Such support may positively impact the retention of tutors. Evaluation of tutor/student compatibility, after an initial match has been made, seems desirable as does the creation of student support groups and the continual recognition of achievement. Programs may need to be more ready to move an individual from a one-on-one tutoring situation to a potentially more supportive group-learning environment. In general, the student/tutor relationship should be monitored carefully, with an emphasis on mutually realistic expectations. Any possible gap between student and tutor must be bridged to allow clients the dignity of a compatible and

sensitive tutor match. Any change of tutor should be handled carefully. A relationship has been established and the impact of the change should be addressed.

Assistance with the identification and structuring of long-term personal and job-related goals for literacy may need to be provided, particularly within the context of intermediate and more easily attainable goals. Whenever possible student's self-defined goals and material should be incorporated by the program.

Issues of the flexibility of scheduling must also be considered in order to accommodate changing client work schedules. This could positively impact the conflict between the client's desire to learn to read and the necessity of generating an income. The programs' general inability to accommodate this client need is a matter of concern.

A large number of students indicated that they would return to literacy programs and it is important that the providers maintain communication with those students not currently in service in order to facilitate renewed participation. The difficulties of doing this are recognized but providers might, for example, enlist other agencies to help those whose phones have been disconnected. Given the various personal problems indicated by the participants in this study, it also appears important for literacy providers to work closely with other social agencies that can help with transportation, child care, and health needs. With careful research conducted on its individual "drop-out population", a program should be able to

produce a profile of drop-out predictors. High-risk students in terms of these predictors should be identified on intake and supported appropriately. To facilitate this research, as well as research across programs, better record-keeping than this study frequently found is imperative, as are common definitions of such categories as "waiting-list", "in-service" and "drop out." Most students in this study expressed surprise at being asked why they had "dropped out". Such follow-up of lost clients should be routine in order to better serve the needs of those being tutored and to help create a drop-out profile of those at-risk of becoming one more number in the attrition rate statistics.

Considering the amount of effort dedicated to student recruitment, it is ironic and wasteful of hard-won resources for the attrition rate for literacy programs to remain so high. The participants in this study wanted to learn to read and had made the crucial first step into a program. The literacy service delivery system must continue to search for ways to sustain the initial enthusiasm and interest of their clients. Then, those such as the elderly woman interviewed for this study, who would still dearly like to learn to write her name and the few messages that would enable her to send cards to friends in nursing homes, might still be part of a literacy program.

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TABLE 1 Demographic Data of Literacy Clients Contacted

	AGE				SEX			RACE		
	N	x	SD	Range	N	M	F	N	Minority	White
Participants:	60	38.8	15.7	14-70	60	32 (53%) (f)	28 (47%)	60	35 (58%)	25 (42%) (f)
Non-Participants:	8*	51.9	17.4	30-82	9	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	8*	4 (50%)	4 (50%)

* = 1 missing

Table 2 Clients' reasons for leaving programs and suggestions for increasing retention .

	Reasons for Attrition		Suggestions for Increasing Retention
	Major Reason	Total	
	60 responses	99 responses	95 responses
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
1. Factors service providers may impact:			
• Tutor factors	11 (18%)	16 (16%)	21 (22%)
• Client felt not learning and/or ill at ease	11 (18%)	22 (22%)	15 (16%)
• Tutorial place/time	2 (3%)	2 (2%)	16 (17%)
• Need for self-defined goal/material	-	-	14 (15%)
• Support/motivation	-	4 (4%)	7 (7%)
Total:	**24 (40%)**	**44 (44%)**	**73 (77%)**
2. Personal Factors:			
• Work Schedule	14 (23%)	27 (27%)	10 (10%)
• Ill health-personal/family	10 (17%)	13 (13%)	2 (2%)
• Family Crisis	4 (7%)	-	3 (3%)
Total:	**28 (47%)**	**40 (40%)**	**15 (16%)**
3. Factors other agencies can impact:			
• Transportation	4 (7%)	8 (8%)	4 (4%)
• Child Care	3 (5%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)
• Eyeglasses	1 (2%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)
Total:	**8 (13%)**	**15 (15%)**	**7 (7%)**